

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 00237 121617Z
ACTION NODS-00

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S E C R E T DAMASCUS 0237

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FOR SECRETARY FROM MURPHY

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PGOV SY US
SUBJECT: PROPOSED SECRETARIAL VISIT TO DAMASCUS FOLLOWING JERUSALEM
TALKS

REF: DAMASCUS 236

1. I RECOMMEND THAT FOLLOWING ATTENDANCE AT JERUSALEM TALKS
YOU VISIT DAMASCUS TO BRIEF SYRIAN LEADERSHIP ON STATUS
OF NEGOTIATIONS AND, EVEN MORE IMPORTANTLY, ON US INTENTIONS
AND EXPECTATIONS.

2. AM PROMPTED TO MAKE THIS RECOMMENDATION BY THE DISTURBING
UNDERTONES OF THE PRESENTATIONS BY ASSAD AND KHADDAM LAST
WEEK TO CODEL ZABLOCKI AND KHADDAM'S JANUARY 11 PRESENTATION
TO CODEL WILLIAMS/STEVENS. I SENSE SYRIAN SUSPICIONS ARE
VERY HIGH THAT THE USG IS UP TO NO GOOD AS FAR AS ARAB
(READ SYRIAN) INTERESTS ARE CONCERNED. ALTHOUGH NEITHER
THE PRESIDENT NOR THE FOREIGN MINISTER ARTICULATED WITH ANY
PRECISION STEPS THEY PLAN TO TAKE IN NEAR FUTURE, ONE
POINT EXPRESSED BY SEVERAL CABINET MINISTERS PRIVATELY
TO ME -- AND ALLUDED TO BY KHADDAM IN HIS JANUARY 11
MEETING -- IS THAT SYRIA IS BEING FORCED INTO THE SOVIET

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CAMP IN REACTION BOTH TO THE "US-CREATED IRANIAN-SAUDI-
EGYPTIAN AXIS" AND TO THE SYRIAN PRESUMPTION OF ISRAELI
DEEDMNS TOWARD THIS COUNTRY. THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP HAS
ALREADY MOVED TO ASSURE SOVIET POLITICAL SUPPORT AND
INCREASED FLOW OF ARMS. I COULD EXPLAIN LATTER AS SIMPLE
OPPORTUNISM, EXPLOITING THE RIGHT MOMENT TO BEEF UP THE
SYRIAN ARSENAL, BUT I BELIEVE THERE IS GENUINE CONCERN AT HIGH

LEVELS HERE THAT THIS COUNTRY COULD SOON BECOME THE TARGET OF ISRAELI ATTACK.

3. REPORTS POINT TO RECENTLY ENHANCED POSSIBILITIES FOR SYRO-IRAQI RAPPROCHEMENT -- A DEVELOPMENT WHICH I SEE IN NO WAY BENEFITTING OUR INTERESTS IF, AS I ASSUME, ANY SUCH RAPPROCHEMENT WILL INVOLVE SYRIAN MOVEMENT TOWARDS HARDLINERS. DURING HIS INTENSIVE TALKS HERE JANUARY 10-12, ALGERIAN PRESIDENT HAS BY ALL REPORTS BEEN TRYING TO INCREASE ENTICEMENTS TO SYRIA TO RESOLVE ITS DIFFERENCES WITH IRAQ. WE DO NOT YET KNOW WHAT RESULTS ALGERIAN FOMMIN BOUTEFILKA MAY HAVE ACHIEVED IN HIS LAST LIGHTNING ROUND-TRIP TO BAGHDAD FROM DAMASCUS JANUARY 61 (REFTEL).

4. YOUR VISIT WOULD BE USEFUL OCCASION TO REASSURE THE SYRIANS THAT WE WOULD OPPOSE ANY UNPROVOKED ISRAELI STRIKE. IN ADDITION, VISIT WOULD BE DESIRABLE BECAUSE:

A) WE AGREED DURING YOUR LAST VISIT HERE THAT WE WOULD KEEP THE SYRIANS INFORMED OF DEVELOPMENTS IN THE NEGOTIATIONS;

B) A SECRETARIAL VISIT HAS BEEN OUR TRADITIONAL WAY OF KEEPING THE SYRIANS INFORMED AT CRITICAL TURNING POINTS;

C) IT IS A PUBLIC SIGNAL THAT WE VALUE OUR
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RELATIONSHIP WITH THE SARG AND WANT TO CONTINUE WORKING WITH THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP TOWARDS THE GOAL OF A COMPREHENSIVE SOLUTION;

D) CONVERSELY, NOT TO VISIT DAMASCUS WOULD BE SEEN AS LESSENED SYRIAN IMPORTANCE OF NEGOTIATIONS IN US EYES.

5. ARGUMENTS AGAINST YOUR VISIT WOULD BE:

A) YOUR CONCLUSION THAT DEVELOPMENTS IN JERUSALEM HAVE PRODUCED NOTHING ENCOURAGING REGARDING POSSIBLE RECONCILIATION OF ARAB AND ISRAELI VIEWPOINTS. IF THE LATTER WERE THE CASE, TO ADMIT THIS TO THE SYRIANS WOULD ONLY INCREASE THEIR INTRANSIGENCE AND CONVICTION THEY ARE ON THE RIGHT TRACK.

B) A JUDGMENT THAT YOUR STAYING AWAY FROM SYRIA AT THIS POINT WOULD INCREASE SYRIA'S ANXIETY AND CONSEQUENTLY STIMULATE THEIR DESIRE NOT TO BE EXCLUDED FROM THE PEACE PROCESS. I DO NOT FIND THIS ARGUMENT PERSUASIVE, PARTICULARLY SINCE SYRIA IS UNDER DAILY PRESSURE TO ADOPT AN EVEN MORE RIGID STANCE VIS-A-VIS

ISRAEL AND THE EGYPTIAN-ISRAELI TALKS. WE NEED A
COUNTERVAILING PRESSURE.

7. YOUR VISIT NEED BE NO MORE THAN A FEW HOURS AND COULD
POSSIBLY BE COMBINED WITH A STOP IN AMMAN SUCH AS YOU
MADE ON RETURNING TO THE STATES LAST AUGUST.

8. IN SUM, IT IS VERY DIFFICULT TO ASSESS JUST WHERE
SYRIA IS HEADING BUT I FIND THE CURRENT SIGNS DIS-
COURAGING. IF SYRIANS ARE INCLINED TO STAY ON DEAD
CENTER, YOUR VISIT COULD AT A MINIMUM HELP KEEP THEM THERE.

9. PLEASE ADVISE.

MURPHY

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